



## A Booklet for Stress

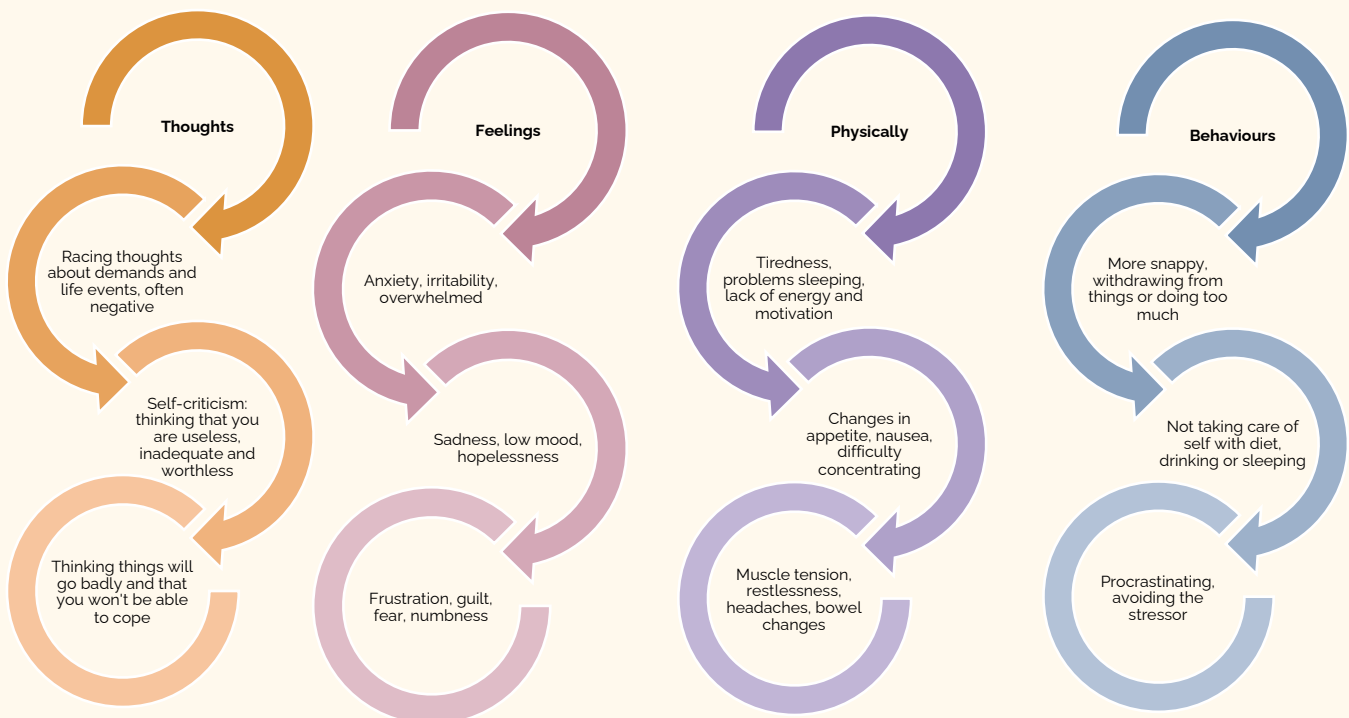
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# Feeling Stressed

Almost everyone has experienced a time where they have felt overwhelmed by stress. A certain amount of stress is common and almost necessary to function but sometimes stress can overwhelm us. This can result in feeling low or anxious and can lead to burnout. Sometimes it's obvious why you're feeling stressed, a big life event may have happened or an ongoing stressor like work or family problems. Other times it may not feel as obvious. This information might help you identify things that could be contributing and help reduce your stress.

When people feel stressed they notice various things changing. We can group these into categories. Do you recognise any of the following?



How would you describe how you're feeling at the moment?

# Goals

When we're feeling stressed, something that can be difficult but helpful to start off with is thinking about what you want to change. What would you like to be doing if you didn't feel this way? Having goals in mind can help increase your motivation and sense of achievement. They can give you a direction to look towards.

Breaking goal setting down is proven to help create goals that people are more likely to stick to. It can also make thinking about goals feel less overwhelming. We call this method of goal setting SMART goals.

Tip: small goals are more achievable to start with

**Specific:** Try to be as specific as possible including dates, times and what exactly you want to achieve

e.g. 'I want to exercise more' -> 'I want to jog twice a week'

**Measurable:** Making a goal measurable means you can track your progress

e.g. 'twice a week' is a way to measure progress

**Achievable:** Is this a realistic goal in the short term? Is it possible to achieve in the next month? If not, think about breaking it down

e.g. 'I want to run a marathon' -> 'I want to jog non-stop for 30 minutes'

**Relevant:** Make sure the goal you have chosen is in line with what you want to address. Will achieving the goal make a difference to you now?

e.g. 'is jogging is something that makes me feel good? Or do I prefer yoga?'

**Time Specific:** Try to set a time frame of when you want to achieve this goal

e.g. 'in a month's time I want to be jogging twice a week'

Write down your goals here using the above tips:

1.

2.

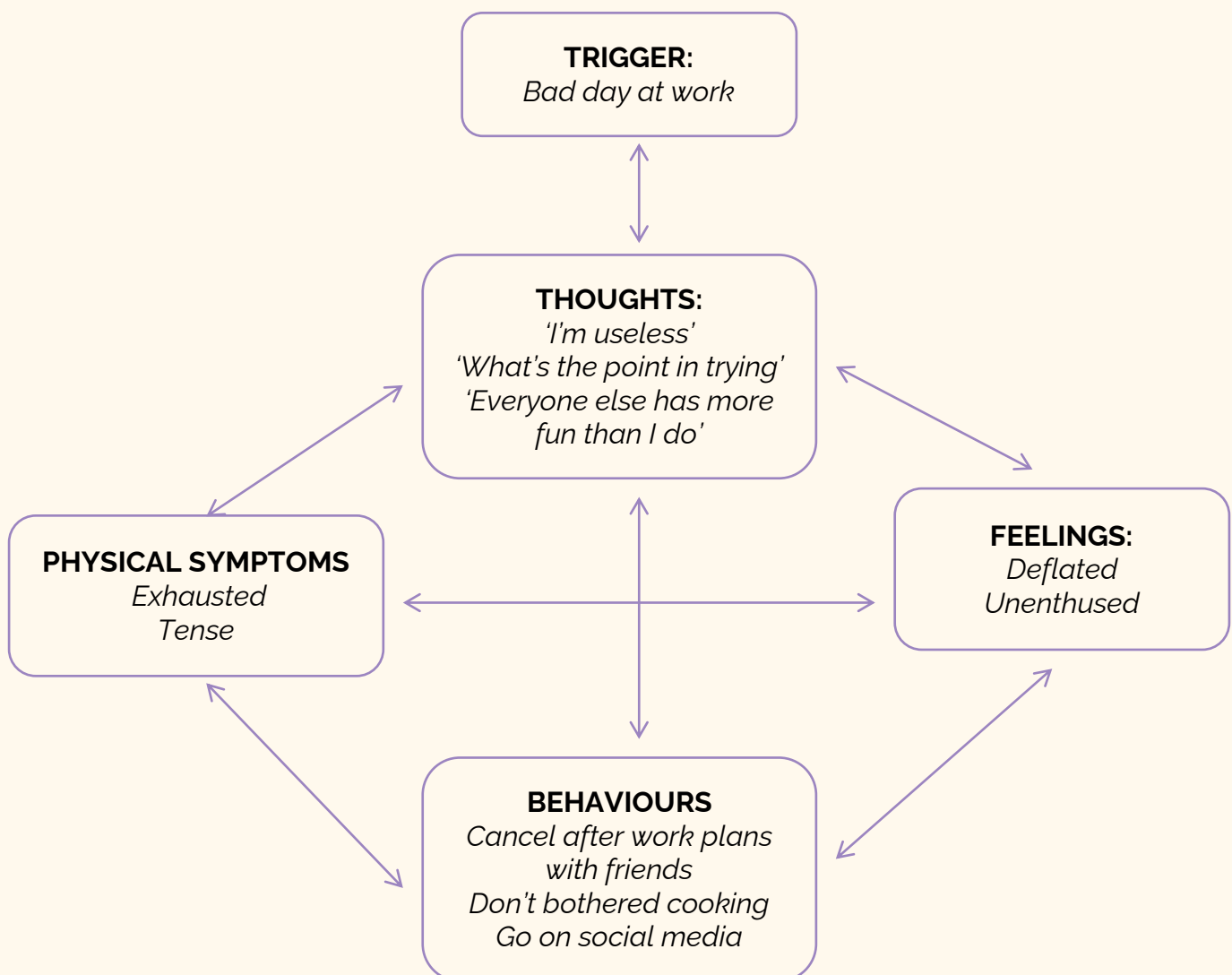
3.

# The Cycle

Changes in our mood can fall into 4 main categories: thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms and behaviours. These changes can all feed into one another to make the problem feel worse.

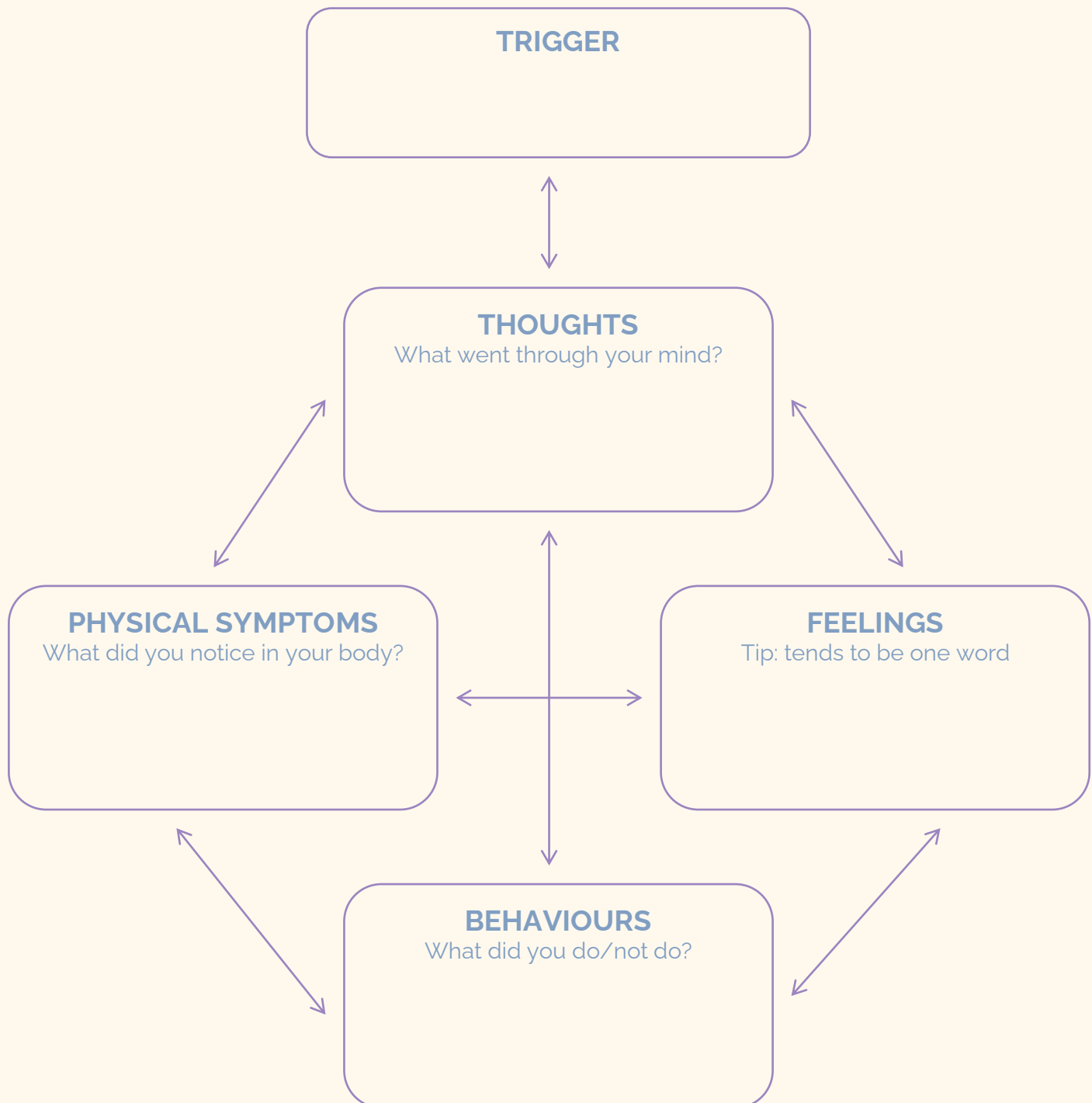
For example, if we start to feel stressed at work we might start spending longer at work and miss social plans. This can cause resentment towards work, a feeling of imbalance and lack of enjoyment. This may make us more irritable. This may make us more irritable, which could lead us to be less productive, resulting in feeling more stressed. The cycle continues. This cycle can work in many ways, for example at work: tasks feel overwhelming so you avoid them, this results in build up and more overwhelm, triggering negative thoughts that you aren't good enough at your job.

This is known as a 'vicious cycle'



## Your turn

Try to think of a time you felt stressed recently and map it out below. Starting with the trigger: what was the situation? Then go from there with the first thing you noticed: a shift in your feelings or a negative thought?



# Understanding Stress

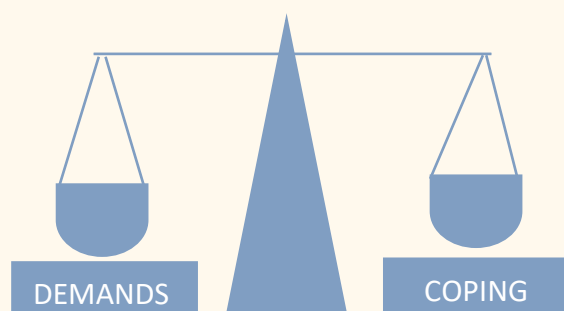
Stress is like a set of scales that needs balancing.

On one side of the scale are the demands placed on you

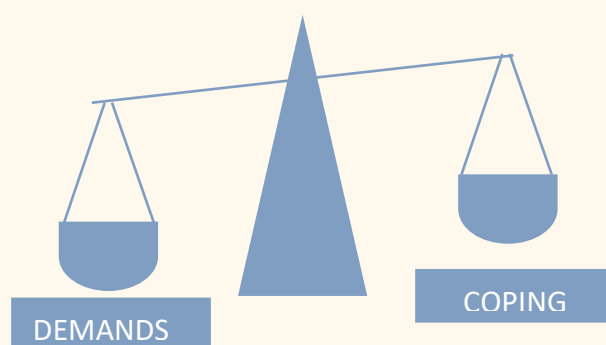
*Causes of stress*

On the other side of the scale is your ability to cope with the demands

*Ways we relieve stress*



Demands are common in life, when we have ways to cope we manage. The scale is balanced.



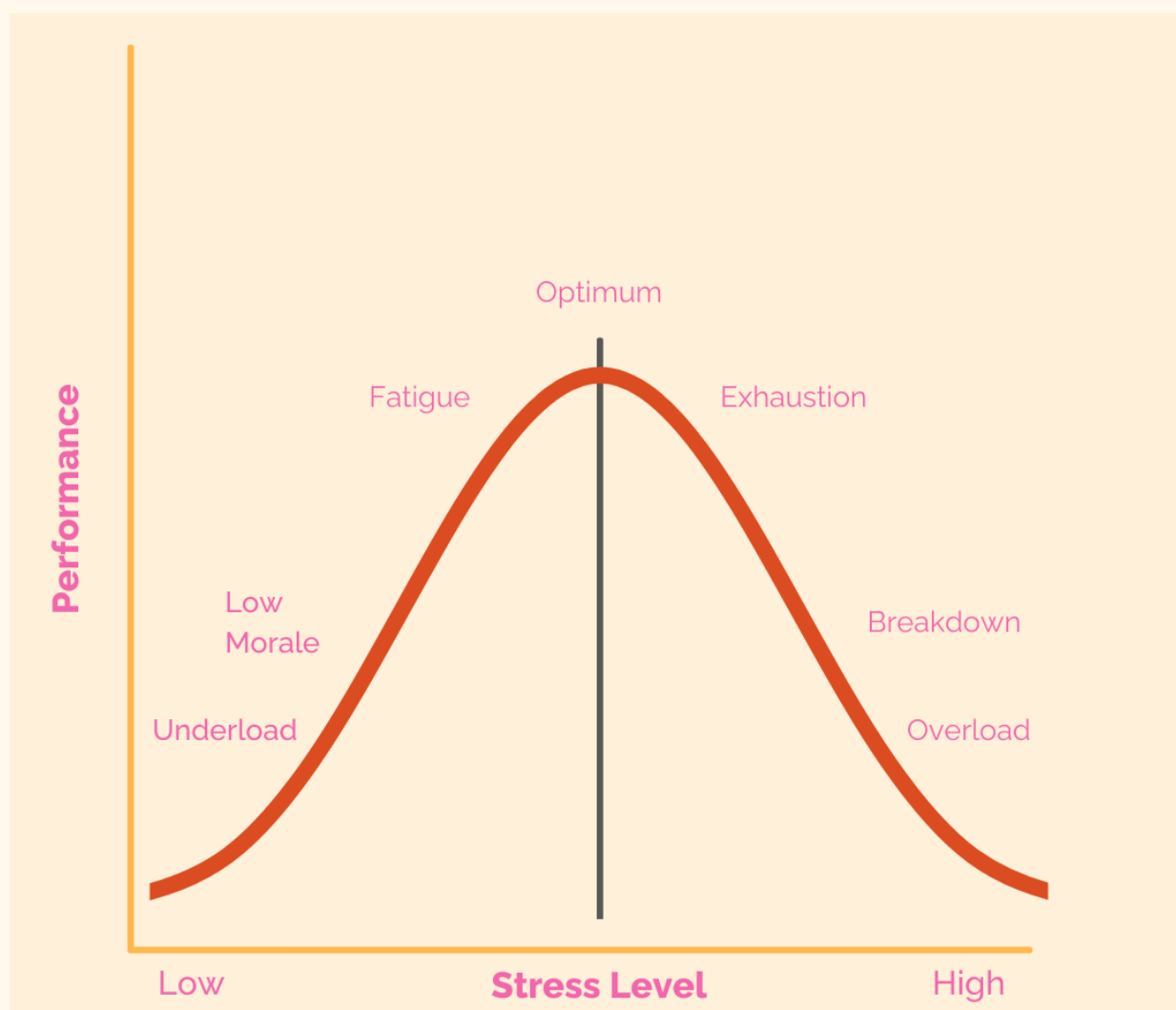
When demands increase and we don't have ways to cope we start to feel overwhelmed. The scale tips.

If this happens we need to regain balance. You can do this in two ways:

- *Decrease demands*
- *Increase ability to cope*

## Stress Graph

Stress is a natural response that is designed to keep us safe in dangerous situations, our bodies react by triggering the release of hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones can lead us to feel energised and motivated. However, over a prolonged period of time having high levels of these hormones can result in inflammation and stomach problems as well as various other physical and mental health problems.



This graph demonstrates the optimum amount of stress. It shows how too little stress can leave us feeling unmotivated. It also shows how too much can leave us overwhelmed and exhausted.

Everyone's optimum stress level differs, yours may even differ throughout your life. The trick is to know when stress has become too much for you and how to cope with this.

# The Stress Response

We all developed a fight or flight long ago when responding to threat. It is our body's way of automatically preparing itself for danger. This response can be triggered by stress, when we perceive something as stressful our body responds to it as a threat. This means we start releasing cortisol and adrenaline (two types of hormone). Adrenaline is fast releasing and often feels more intense, but then subsides slightly quicker. Cortisol is released more slowly and can stay in our system for longer, it's often a response to ongoing stressors. The release of both these can bring on some of the following physical symptoms you may recognise:

## **Dizziness**

Because our blood and oxygen is going to the muscles, we need to breathe faster which can cause light headedness

## **Nausea / Butterflies**

Our digestion slows down as a response to threat, this can cause our stomachs to feel strange and release different acids

## **Tight Chest**

Muscles tense as they prepare for danger, leading to our chest feeling tight when taking deep breaths

## **Rapid heart rate**

Our heart pumps faster to make sure there is enough oxygen circulating to our major muscles and organs

## **Increased Body Temperature**

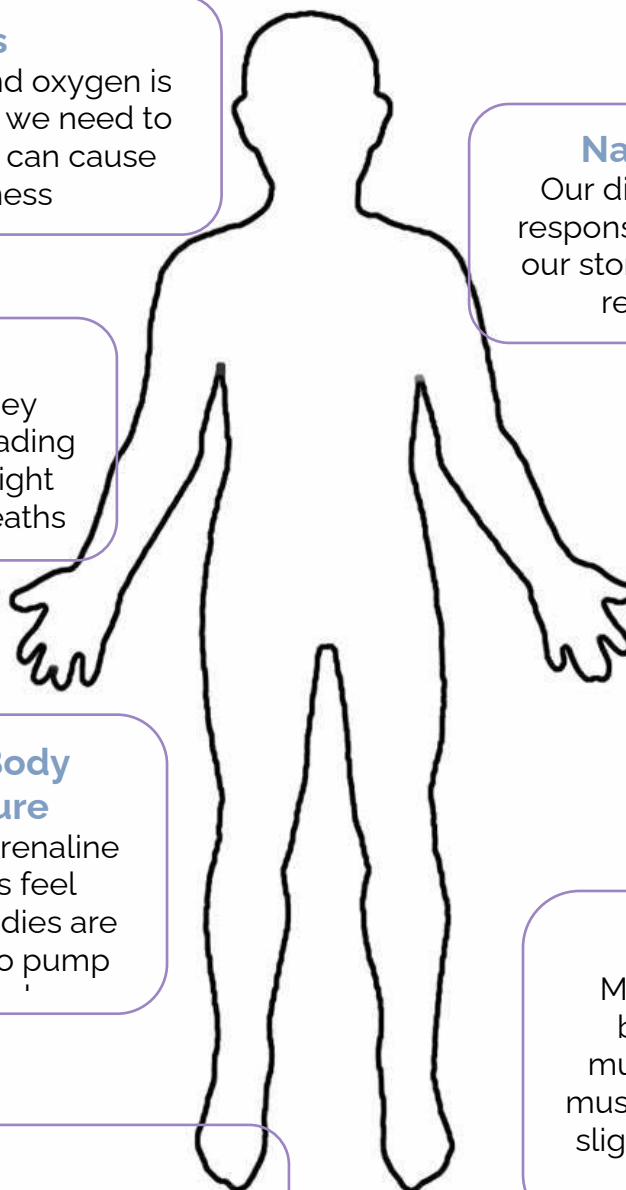
The release of adrenaline often makes us feel flushed as our bodies are working harder to pump

## **Shaking**

Muscle tension and blood flow to the muscles can result in muscles increasing very slight in size which can cause shaking

## **Sweating or blushing**

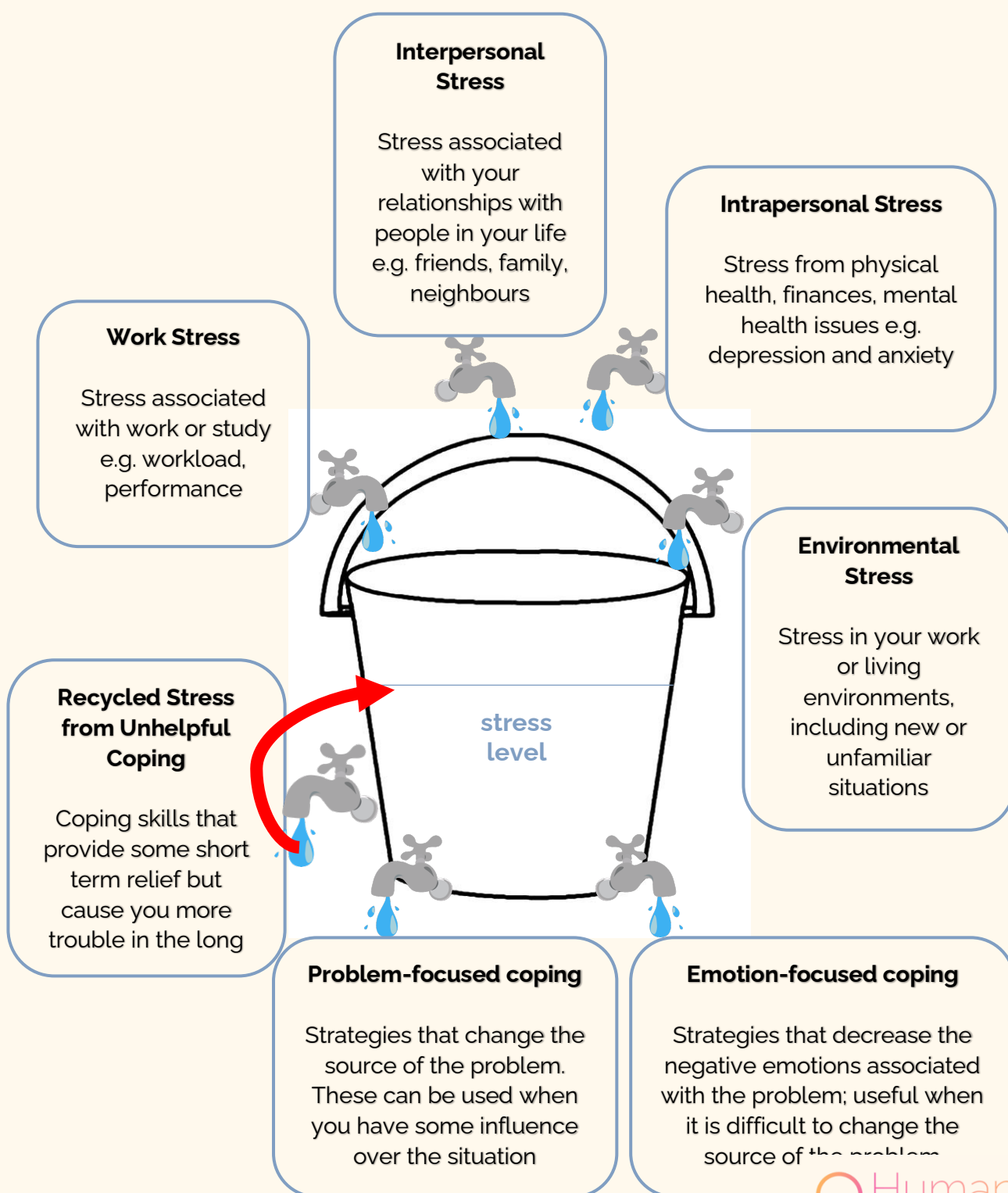
Increase blood flow close to the skin causes us to blush





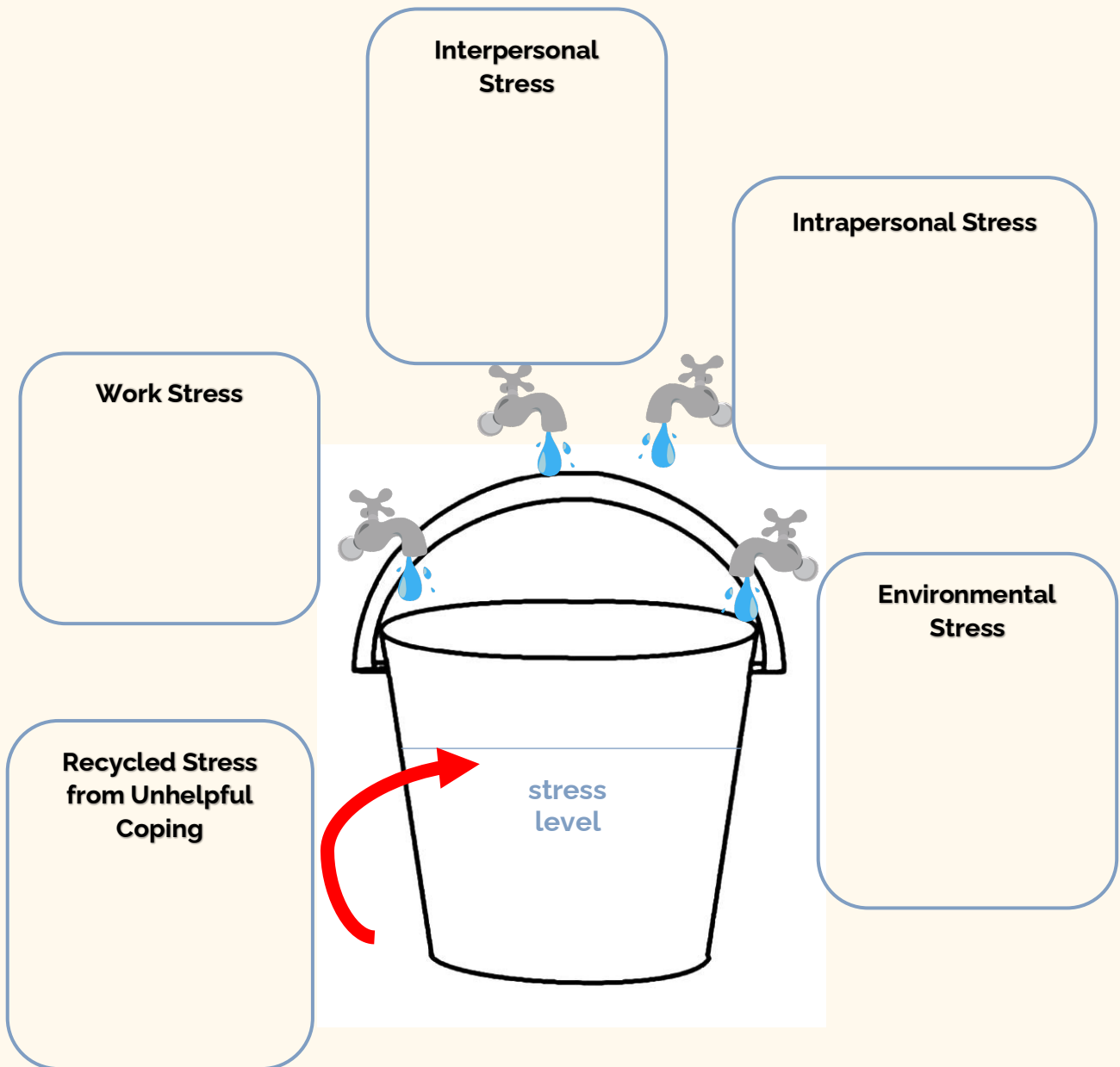
# Stress Bucket

This diagram draws out what is causing you stress (the water flowing in at the top of the bucket) and how you are coping with it (the taps letting it out at the bottom – divided into two categories of coping styles). If there is too much stress coming in and not enough ways to cope, the buckets will overflow, i.e. you will feel completely overwhelmed. The bit in the middle we call recycled stress, these may be things you do as a response to stress which are unhelpful in the long term and only add stress such as drinking more and sleeping less.



# Your Stress Bucket

The first step is recognising your stressors. Stress can fluctuate day to day so you may notice that some days are worse than others. This could be because of a situation or because you haven't slept well so feel more tired and less resilient to smaller things. Recognising these daily fluctuations can be really helpful in managing stress.



# Emotion-Focused VS Problem-Focused Coping

As discussed above, our sympathetic nervous system is activated when we feel stressed and cortisol and adrenaline are released. To counterbalance this we need to help activate our parasympathetic nervous system. This is often referred to as our 'rest and digest response'. When activated it released acetylcholine. Acetylcholine is released when our body feels relaxed through things like relaxation exercises, enjoyable activities and in REM sleep. Not having enough of this will mean our body is in a higher state of tension with likely higher cortisol levels. Often leading to symptoms of burnout. The aim is to restore the balance between your sympathetic and your parasympathetic nervous systems by balancing how much stress is coming in and how you are coping with it. Both emotion focused and problem focused coping strategies can help.

## Emotion-focused Coping Strategies

Emotion focused coping strategies are things we find relaxing. They could include breathing techniques, general downtime or activities like meditation or yoga. They can also include talking through your difficulties to off load and discuss difficult emotions. Emotion focused strategies including improving switching off from stressors i.e. managing to leave work stressors at work and instead enjoying pleasurable times outside of work rather than spending time outside of work thinking about difficulties.

## Problem-focused Coping Strategies

These help reduce the demands that are adding to our stress. We can't always change the situations that are causing us stress, but sometimes we can manage areas of them or change how much time we spend thinking about them. Strategies like problem solving can often help with this, as can setting boundaries in our lives.

What are your emotion focused coping strategies?

What are your problem focused coping strategies?

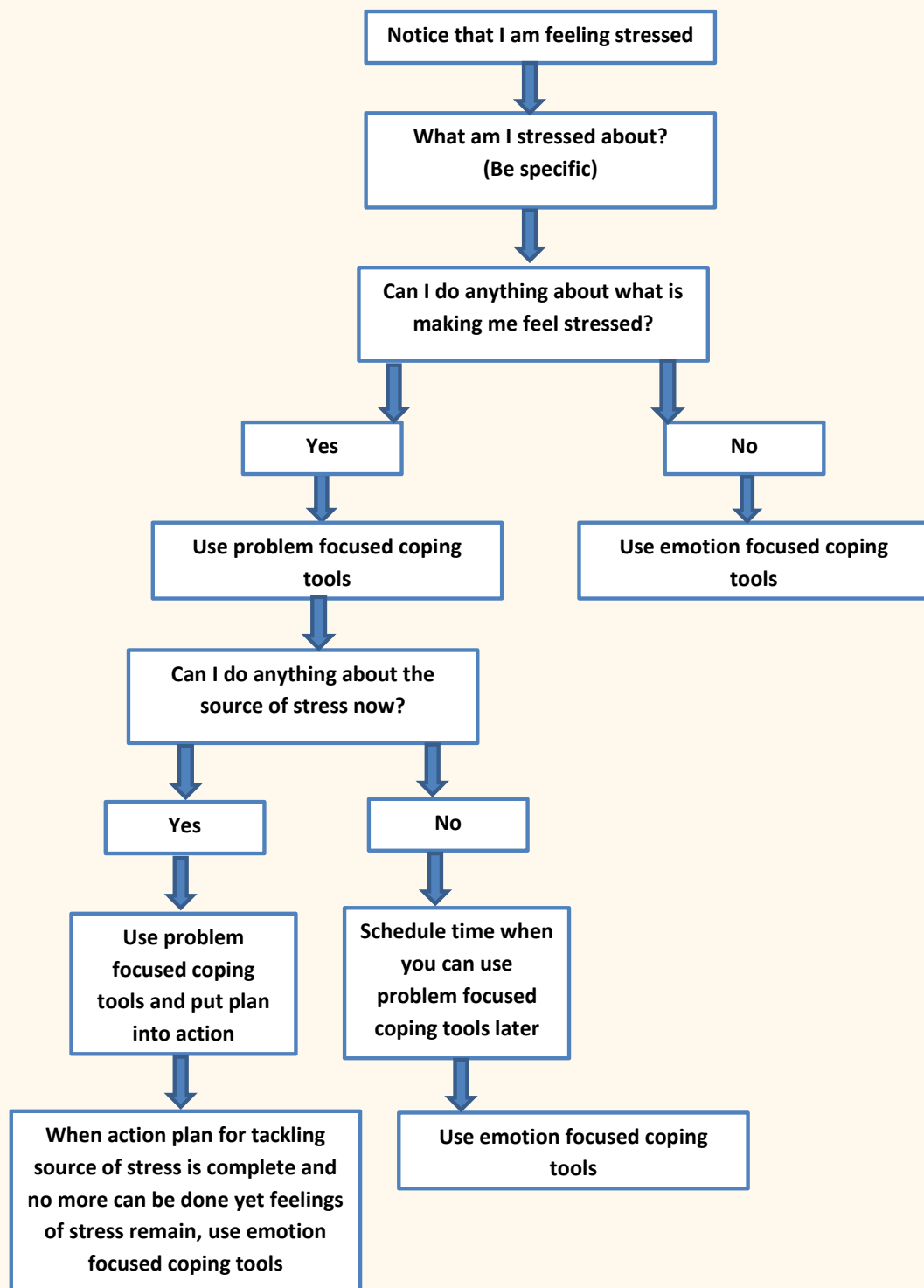
# Overview of Top Tips

Before we go through some more detailed emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies here are some top tips to think about.

1. **Breathing:** Incorporate mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing exercises or yoga into your routine. We will give more information of these on the next page.
2. **Regular Physical Activity:** Engage in regular exercise, which not only helps alleviate stress but also contributes to better cardiovascular health and overall resilience.
3. **Healthy Lifestyle Choices:** Prioritize a balanced diet, adequate sleep and social connections to fortify your body against the negative impacts of stress.
4. **Work-Life Balance:** Set clear boundaries between work and personal time to prevent constant exposure to stressors.
5. **Acknowledging Your Limits:** Practising effective time management and delegation can mitigate the impact of work-related stress. Knowing when you need help and asking for it is also important, both personally and professionally.
6. **Recovery:** Building routines that allow for proper recuperation and down time is essential for minimizing physical stress.
7. **Developing effective communication skills:** Setting healthy boundaries and practising empathy can foster healthier connections and reduce relationship-induced stress.
8. **Engaging in introspection:** Exploring new avenues of personal growth and seeking out community and activities that align with our beliefs can help alleviate this stress.
9. **Minimizing exposure to harmful substances:** Through conscious consumer choices, proper ventilation and adopting natural alternatives, we can contribute to reducing environmental stress.
10. **Reflect:** Using booklets such as these help create time to reflect on your stressors and emotional responses. Create time in your week to consider what difficulties have been building up. Without time to reflect we can't change.

# Stress Tree

In times of heightened stress, it can be helpful to think through the following steps to determine what will be most helpful for you in these moments. We will go on to explain more about different emotion focused vs. problem focused coping strategies.



# Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

There are many ways we can de-stress and let off emotion. Specific relaxation exercises which we will explain more in depth can be really helpful. Try to also consider what helps you release emotional stress, things like writing down your thoughts and feelings, talking to a friend about how you're feeling, listening to relaxing music or going on a walk are all things that can be immensely helpful to de-stress.

## Relaxation

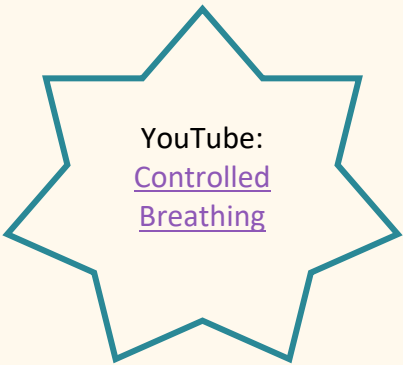
Stress can feel very physical, and we can experience symptoms in our bodies like the ones we have previously identified. It is useful to be able to recognise the early signs of stress coming on, as then we can put relaxation techniques into practice.

Relaxation strategies can help activate our parasympathetic nervous system and release acetylcholine. Relaxation is a skill which needs to be learnt and can take time and practice to master. There are many types of relaxation exercises, you can YouTube ones or follow some of the following.

## Controlled Breathing

It is common for changes in breathing to occur when we are feeling stressed, linked to an increase in heart rate. Slowing breathing down can help to reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress, giving a greater sense of control and coping ability.

- ➔ **Take a deep breath in, slowly counting to 5**
- ➔ **Breathe out slowly, counting to 5. Focus on releasing all of the air from your lungs**



YouTube:  
[Controlled Breathing](#)

### Tips:

- Make sure you are sitting comfortably, and close your eyes if you wish
- Some people find it helpful to imagine the calm colour blue when breathing in, and the colour red when breathing out, to represent the tension leaving
- It can be helpful to look at the second hand of a watch or clock to help control your breaths in and out.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two-step process of tensing and relaxing muscle groups. Through practice you can learn to distinguish between the feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. Then, you can begin to “cue” this relaxed state at the physical sign of stress. By tensing and releasing, you learn not only what relaxation feels like, but also to recognise when you are starting to get tense during the day.

### Step 1: Tension

The first step is applying muscle tension to a specific part of the body. First, focus on the target muscle group. Next, take a slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds. It is important to really feel the tension in the muscles, which may even cause a bit of discomfort or shaking.

### Step 2: Relaxation

This step involves quickly relaxing the tensed muscles. After about 5 seconds, let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles. Exhale as you do this step. You should feel the muscles become loose and limp, as the tension flows out. It is important to very deliberately focus on and notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Remain in this relaxed state for about 15 seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group. Repeat the tension-relaxation steps with the steps below.

After completing all of the muscle groups, take some time to enjoy the deep state of relaxation. A recommended full sequence of muscle groups is given below:

1. Right hand and lower arm (clench your fist and tense the lower arm)
2. Left hand and lower arm
3. Right upper arm (bring your hand to your shoulder and tense your biceps)
4. Left upper arm
5. Right lower leg and foot (point your toe and gently tense the calf muscle)
6. Left lower leg and foot
7. Both thighs (press your knees and thighs tightly together)
8. Abdomen (pull your abdominal muscles in tightly)
9. Chest (take a deep breath and hold it in)
10. Shoulders and back (hunch your shoulders or pull them towards your ears)
11. Neck and throat (gently push your head backwards against the surface you are resting on)
12. Lips (press them tightly together without clenching your teeth)
13. Eyes (closing them tightly)
14. Lower forehead (frown and pull your eyebrows together)
15. Upper forehead (wrinkle your forehead)

# Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

Problem focused coping strategies focus on what you can practically do to help alleviate the stress. There are many ways you can do this but the two main ways we are going to focus on are examining balance (including boom and bust) and looking at problem solving strategies.

## Balance

When we are stressed there is often an imbalance in our daily lives. We channel our energy into one area and neglect other things like routine tasks that need to get done. In the long term this can result in feeling more stressed and overwhelmed. When we feel stressed we can focus on all the necessary things we need to do and forget that self-care activities like taking breaks and talking to friends can help us reset in order to focus on other tasks. This can also go the other way round, sometimes we find the necessary tasks so overwhelming that we avoid them and start doing lots of pleasurable things to make us feel better, but if there are lots of necessary tasks left undone we'll feel this underlying stress. To improve our resilience to stress we need to have a balance of activities in different areas of our life.

Think about activities in terms of these 3 categories:

- **Routine:** things that are done most days which make our lives comfortable.  
*E.g. washing, housework, preparing food, cleaning, showering*
- **Pleasurable:** things that give us a sense of achievement or connectedness to others when we do them. They often improve our quality of life.  
*E.g. seeing friends, hobbies, gardening, sports, going to the park – these are likely to be very personal to you.*
- **Necessary:** Things that we really do need to do. Often, the longer we leave them the more stressed we feel and the worse the consequences are.  
*E.g. paying bills, applying for jobs, medical appointments, childcare.*

Imagine a 3-legged little wooden stool. Each leg is one of these categories. The more you do in one of the areas the more that leg of the stool grows. Imagine if you're going out all the time doing loads of social things (pleasure) but you're neglecting your sleep and diet (necessary) and your house is a mess and you have no clean clothes (routine). The stool is going to be completely lopsided. This is just like your stress levels. You'll feel unsteady and overwhelmed. You'll feel less able to cope with things generally. Imagine trying to rest something on that stool? It would fall off. Just like how you'd feel trying to take on any more tasks in your week.



Try to identify activities in these areas of your life and consider what you balance is like over your week:

Routine (e.g., cooking, walking the dog, food shopping)

Pleasurable (e.g., cinema, reading, friends, arts & crafts, films)

Necessary (e.g., paying bills, taking children to nursery)

What is your balance like?

# Planning

To help re-balance you need to set out intentions for your week, specifically you need to make a plan. Start by filling in all the things you have committed to and already do such as working hours, appointments or meals out. This will show you the free time you have outside of this. Then think about what other activities you need to plan in – relaxation, down time, more enjoyable things, routine tasks? Write everything down and then look at the week and judge if it looks manageable. It is important that once you create this plan you stick to it no matter what. If you don't feel like doing a task try to engage in it. - remember, you've planned it for a reason.

## Tips for Planning

### Write everything down

Write things down even if they're small, prompts like 'do washing' can be really helpful so smaller tasks don't build up.

### Be specific

You are more likely to do an activity if you have decided exactly *what, when, where and with who* you are going to do that activity. E.g. you say to a friend 'let's go to the cinema next week' and leave it vs. 'let's go and see X on Thursday at 7pm' -> which one are you more likely to do?

### Do the basics

When starting to schedule, it's important to plan in meals, sleep routine and some exercise because these things are so important in stabilising our mood.

### Pace yourself

Start small, give yourself space in your diary to relax, time for self-care. Planning in 'time to chill or watch tv' is an activity that is important in balancing everything.

### Break the task down

If something feels overwhelming or you are struggling to achieve it, how can you break it down? Maybe schedule small bits of it throughout the week?

### Check

When you look at your plan does it feel achievable? The biggest mistake people make is planning too much then feeling defeated when they can't do it all. Only plan a few things. Imagine someone wants to run a marathon after breaking their ankle, how would they go about their training? Would they start trying to run the whole thing? What would happen if they did?

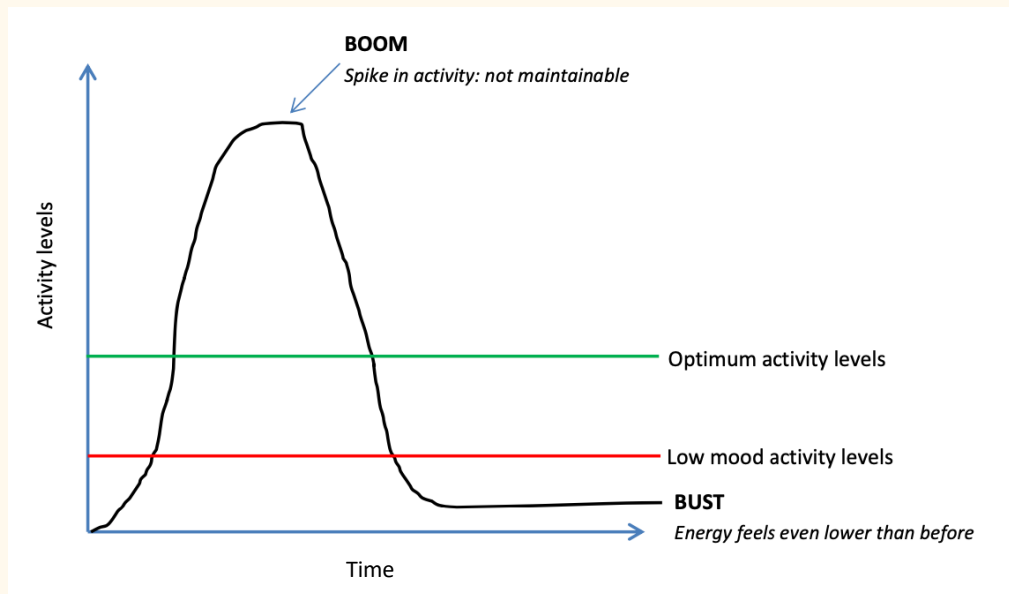
### Reward yourself

Try to acknowledge when you have completed something. Some people find it helpful to 'check off' activities that they've done and think about how it made them feel. It isn't easy at first so help build yourself up by acknowledging small wins.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning							
Afternoon							
Evening							

# Boom and Bust

Remember it is important not to exhaust yourself, especially on days where you may be feeling good. If you overexert yourself on these days and ignore signs of fatigue you will 'boom'. This can be, for example, overdoing social plans or working too much. After a while you will inevitably crash and need rest to recover. This is the 'Bust' phase. Sadly, as you enter an extended spell of inactivity you can feel worse, so we aim to avoid this.



The goal is to manage your energy so that you reach a place of steadiness and balance so your stress is at optimal level.

Can you see this happening in your life?  
What do you need to watch out for?  
How can you avoid this?

# Problem Solving

When we are feeling stressed, because there is so much going on in our heads, it can be difficult to organise and understand what our problems and their potential solutions are. Problem solving can help us to think outside the box and reduce some of the demands on us.

There are 7 key stages to problem solving

## Step 1: Identify the Problem

Try to be as specific as possible

## Step 2: Identify potential solutions

Our focus is on thinking about ALL the potential solutions, even if they are silly or don't make sense. By thinking about all the solutions without judging them, we can build momentum and discover some good options

## Step 3: Identify strengths and weakness of each solution

To identify the strengths and weaknesses and ask yourself: Do I believe the solution is likely to work? Am I going to be able to try the solution out? Do I have everything I need to try the solution out? Could the solution cause me even more problems? If this is difficult, maybe a close friend or family member can help you to think of potential solutions

## Step 4: Pick the best solution

## Step 5: Plan the solution

It can help to use the 5 Ws:

- What will I need to do this?
- When will it happen?
- Who will I need to do this with?
- Where will this happen?

If the plan feels too demanding, you can always break it down into smaller steps

## Step 6: Try out the solution

## Step 7: Review how it went

Take some time to review how successful the solution was, what went well or didn't go to plan.

Sometimes our first try doesn't go to plan, but we now have a wealth of information about what can be done differently. We can use this information to review our other potential solutions at step 3 and possibly add some new ones. It's helpful to write this out at first instead of trying to do it in our head, seeing solutions on paper can be most helpful.

# Problem Solving Record Worksheet

**Step 1:** My problem is...

**Step 2:** The potential solutions are...

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

**Step 3:** The strengths and weaknesses of each solution are...

Solution	Strengths	Weaknesses

**Step 4:** The solution I'm going to try out is...

**Step 5:** planning the solution

- What:
- When:
- Where:
- With whom:

**Step 6:** Try out the solution

**Step 7:** This is how the solution went...

## Goal Review

Now you've gone through causes for stress and ways to help cope with stress through emotional and problem focused coping strategies, try to reflect on which strategies you feel will work best for you and how you are using these to work towards your goals. Keep checking in with yourself in terms of how you are progressing towards your goals. We recommend you do this every week or two to ensure you are moving in the right direction. Goals keep us accountable.

What triggers your stress?  
What's your understanding of how stress works?

What strategies help reduce your stress?  
Is there anything you need to change to achieve your goals?

Is there any further support you need right now?

## Staying Well Plan

To feel better and stay well, it is important to continue looking after your mental health just as you would your physical health, using what you have learnt far. When you notice you are feeling better it is helpful to acknowledge what you have done that has led to improvements in order to help stay well in future.

Remember, everyone's mood fluctuates. This is normal. There is a difference between mood fluctuating and potentially relapsing into feeling low again.

**A lapse** is a brief return to feeling low which might be very understandable in a variety of different situations (e.g. something goes wrong at work, difficulty in relationships). During these times we can experience the symptoms of low mood. As we have said, everyone has these moments and they are usually temporary. It can be easy in these moments to dwell on failures or be unkind to yourself - but don't give up on the strategies you have learnt and try to be compassionate to yourself.

**A relapse** is when negative thinking and ways of behaving that you have previously tackled start to spiral and make you feel considerably worse. These periods tend to impact your everyday life and last for longer. During these times you will likely feel unable to apply the strategies you have learnt, so the aim is to identify signs of a relapse early on.

On the final page are some questions to help guide you in summarising your learning from this booklet. We recommend you keep this booklet somewhere safe to refer to in the future if you need to. We advise you keep checking in with how you are feeling and how your weekly balance of activities is moving forwards.



What were you struggling with at the beginning?

What strategies have you learnt that have helped?

How will you continue to make progress and continue to build on what you've achieved so far?

What will you first notice if you start to feel low again? Your 'warning signs' (think about the thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms and behaviours at the beginning)

What will you do if you notice a relapse?